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HEART OF DARKNESS AND "BENITO CERENO"

A COMPARATIVE STUDY

A Thesis

Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Carla Kay

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APPROVAL SHEET

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ABSTRACT

The works of Joseph Conrad and Herman Melville contain many similar themes and techniques. In this study, two of their novellas in particular--Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Melville's "Benito Cereno"--are compared in order to understand better their common themes. Both stories deal with the nature of evil, the indifferent cruelty and power of nature, and the isolation of the individual. At the same time, close comparison of the two stories serves to emphasize a difference indicative of the two authors.

The imagery and symbolism of the two works can be extensively compared. Both contain images connoting disease, blindness, death, and the mindless power of the universe. The images and symbols emphasize the decadence of civilization, the power of primitive nature over man, the ultimate isolation of the individual man, and the ambiguity of reality.

Thus, both stories present a particular vision of the nature of reality to which the four main characters--Marlow and Kurtz in Heart of Darkness and Delano and Cereno in "Benito Cereno"--offer different reactions. Marlow and Delano, who have similar roles to play in their stories, have opposite reactions to the horrors they are exposed to. Marlow's willingness to face and question the unpleasant truth enables him to achieve a kind of insight into the darkness of Kurtz's soul. Delano, because his smug self-satisfaction will not permit him to penetrate beyond appearances, is unable to achieve a similar insight into the soul of Cereno.

Because Marlow can in some way comprehend what has happened to Kurtz, and is still able to preserve the Intended in her vitally necessary illusions, Heart of Darkness concludes with a positive alternative to the evil represented by the corruption of the civilized Kurtz. "Benito Cereno" ends without a similar affirmation, because the man with insight into the truth is not strong enough to survive. It is therefore a more terrible indictment of man's predicament. This difference indicates in general a greater willingness on Melville's part to leave such metaphysical problems unsolved, without the return to the safety of illusions. It was a willingness that Conrad did not share.

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INTRODUCTION

In January, 1907, Joseph Conrad turned down a request to provide a preface for an edition of Herman Melville's Moby Dick. In the letter of reply to Mr. Humphrey Milford, in which he refused this request, Conrad offered the following opinion of his fellow author:

Years ago I looked into Typee and Omoo, but as I didn't find there what I am looking for when I open a book I did go no further. Lately I had in my hand Moby Dick. It struck me as a rather strained rhapsody with whaling for a subject and not a single sincere line in the three volumes of it.¹

Various reasons have been offered for Conrad's aversion to Melville. His reluctance to be labeled solely as a writer of sea fiction is a common explanation. In his book The Vision of Melville and Conrad, Leon Seltzer suggests that he also had an antipathy to being known as an exoticist, a reputation he gained as a result of his first two books, Almayer's Folly and An Outcast of the Islands. Consequently, he was possibly reluctant to associate himself with the author of Typee and Omoo. The clue to a third explanation of Conrad's opinion may be found in his description of Moby

¹Frank MacShane, "Conrad on Melville," American Literature, 29 (1958), 464.

²Leon^F Seltzer, The Vision of Melville and Conrad (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1970), p. xxxii.

Dick as a "strained rhapsody." Both Seltzer and Frank MacShane suggest that the loose, indefinite form of those works of Melville that he had read may have alienated Conrad, a writer who believed that novels should have definite structure and be true to life.³ Melville's allusiveness and tendency to show off his erudition, his often self-conscious rhetoric, and his propagandizing in Typee and Omoo probably also bothered Conrad, who, as Seltzer points out, was "intellectually modest" and had no patience with moralizings and degressions in works of fiction.⁴ Melville's use of Ahab as the central character of Moby Dick may have annoyed Conrad as well. He once wrote a criticism of the use of "damned souls knocking themselves to pieces in the stuffy dark of mystical contradictions," a criticism aimed by implication at Dostoevsky.⁵ Finally, Jesse Green, in his article "Diabolism, Pessimism, and Democracy: Notes on Melville and Conrad," suggests that Melville's conception of democracy, a universal brotherhood of men, might have implied a closer kinship with the uncivilized than Conrad would care to recognize.⁶

Nevertheless, despite Conrad's professed feelings of aversion to Melville, the two authors provide ample grounds

³MacShane, p. 463; Seltzer, p. xxxiii.

⁴Seltzer, pp. xxxiii-xxxiv.

⁵As quoted in Seltzer, pp. xxxiv-xxxv.

⁶Jesse D. Green, "Diabolism, Pessimism, and Democracy: Notes on Melville and Conrad," Modern Fiction Studies, 8 (1962), 296.

for comparison, both in the themes which they employ and in some of the techniques they use in order to express these themes.⁷ Seltzer discusses these similarities at length in his book. He examines the concepts of man's innate egotism, his alienation from an indifferent and often hostile universe, and his inability to know the ultimate truth either about this universe or about himself, ideas which Seltzer shows to be basic to the "vision" of both authors by citing numerous examples from Conrad's and Melville's fiction. However, his approach is thematic and general; he does not compare and contrast any two specific works in detail.

I contend that by comparing and contrasting two of their novellas in particular, Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Melville's "Benito Cereno," it is possible to bring their similarities into an even sharper focus than a more general study can provide, while at the same time illuminating a difference between their bodies of work. Moreover, a comparison of the two works is useful in understanding the various reactions of the four principal characters in the two tales: Marlow and Kurtz in Heart of Darkness, Delano and Cereno in "Benito Cereno." When these four responses to what both authors perceive to be the truth about the nature of the universe and the nature of man, are contrasted, the two stories serve to elucidate one another.

Both novellas take place in a world where the usual

⁷Seltzer, p. xiv.

props and forces of civilization have either grown impotent or disappeared entirely, leaving the main characters to face the forces of darkness with nothing but their own inner strength to rely on. Both stories have similar plots and strikingly similar imagery and symbolism. There is, however, a marked contrast in the endings of the two tales. Because of the character of Marlow, the nature of his quest, and the power of his identification and ultimate repudiation of Kurtz, Heart of Darkness ends with the shaky affirmation of an idea, illusory but still in existence through the conscious choice of a man who has seen into the truth of things. "Benito Cereno," because of the character of its center of perception, Delano, and his inability either to comprehend the nature of the evil which surrounds him or to identify with the despairing Cereno, ends without any sort of conscious, positive alternative to the evil that has been portrayed.

I

The similarities between Heart of Darkness and "Benito Cereno" are numerous, extending from the evocative imagery found in abundance in both tales to the underlying themes which the imagery serves in part to express. As an initial point of comparison between the two works, both were based upon incidents and experiences which actually occurred. "Benito Cereno," which was first published in 1855, is based on a slave mutiny which took place aboard a Spanish ship off the coast of Chile in 1805. This mutiny was described by Captain Amasa Delano in his Narrative of Voyages and Travels, Melville's source for the tale. Heart of Darkness, written almost fifty years later in 1899, is based upon Conrad's own trip up the Congo River in 1890.

Both stories tell of captains travelling over unknown waters on missions of rescue. In both, the captains are confronted by "prehistoric man;"⁸ and, in both stories, the action leads to the revelation of a knowledge of reality to the captain by the man to be rescued. In both stories, the captain is finally unable to save his "double" from the power of blackness which has conquered him.

The basic imagery and symbolism of the stories can be extensively compared. Color imagery is an essential part of

⁸Green, p. 293.

both, and the ambiguity of the use of black and white as symbols noted by Guy Cardwell in "Benito Cereno"⁹ applies to their use in Heart of Darkness as well. The primitive men encountered by the principal characters in both stories are black, and in both tales they embody an intense and savage energy. Marlow first describes this energy in Heart of Darkness when he tells of the native rowers encountered during his journey down the African coast:

They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks--these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast.¹⁰

Later, on his journey to the inner station, he comes across the "wild and passionate uproar" (H. D., 246) of the blacks who inhabit the villages along the river. Marlow affirms, "Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough" (H. D., 246), but he identifies with it and allows it the right to exist as something natural. It is an energy not of itself coupled with evil purpose, and it is destroyed by too much contact with the representatives of European civilization. The "darkness" or "blackness" that is specifically represented as menacing or evil in Heart of Darkness is rather that of the wilderness

⁹Guy Cardwell, "Melville's Gray Story: Symbols and Meaning in 'Benito Cereno,'" Bucknell Review, 8 (May 1959), pp. 154-67.

¹⁰Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness,ⁱⁿ Great Short Works of Joseph Conrad (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 222. Hereafter all references to this edition will be made in the body of the paper.

itself. Marlow's description of the African coast conveys the attitude toward the jungle which will pervade the entire story:

This one [the coast] was almost featureless, as if still in the making, with an aspect of monotonous grimness. The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist. (H. D., 221)

In "Benito Cereno," on the other hand, both the savage energy and the menace are embodied in the black men. Because of their vitality and strength, they have overcome the whites on board the San Dominick and are actually in command of its feeble captain. While in control of the ship, they have committed acts of savage cruelty against the whites, and therefore they are perceived as being purely evil by Cereno, who has an insight into the reality on board the San Dominick which Delano lacks. This combination marks a closer identification between Melville and his black characters than that admitted by Conrad through Marlow. Melville is willing to grant Babo the intellectual subtlety that enables him to carry out cunning and evil acts, the kind of acts which, in Heart of Darkness, are committed by Kurtz, the bearer of the light of civilization.¹¹

In both Heart of Darkness and "Benito Cereno," therefore, the color black has malignant connotations. But white, the traditional symbol of good, is also used to indicate ugliness,

¹¹Green, pp. 293-97, compares Conrad's and Melville's conceptions of the black man.

the ugliness of civilized decadence and disease. The headquarters of the exploitive Belgian company in Heart of Darkness is a "whited sepulchre." Similarly, the San Dominick, a decaying remnant of the glorious times of Spanish conquest and domination that Melville describes in images of death and disease, is also white. Both Kurtz and Cereno appear a ghastly white, in stark contrast to the blackness surrounding them, yet neither is free of the blackness of soul which the darkness symbolizes.

Both stories are also permeated with images and symbols of sickness and death. In Conrad's tale, the feeling evoked by his descriptions of the emaciated natives in the grove, the dying agent, the lazy and grotesque pilgrims of the Middle Station, and, finally, the deteriorating Kurtz himself, is one of bored, listless exhaustion, a feverishness and futility of action which especially typifies the "weak and flabby devil" to which Marlow is being introduced. Aboard Melville's San Dominick, the listlessness is concentrated in the figure of Cereno, who, as he is first seen by Delano, "stood passively by, leaning against the main-mast, at one moment casting a dreary, spiritless look upon his excited people, at the next an unhappy glance toward his visitor."¹² The sick captain's ship is also seen as being in deathly deterioration: "Her keel seemed laid, her ribs put together, and she launched

¹²Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno," Anthology of American Literature, I, ed. George McMichael et al. (New York: Macmillan, 1974), p. 1116. Hereafter all references to this edition will be made in the body of the paper.

from Ezekiel's Valley of Dry Bones" (B. C., 1113). A white sea fowl is seen perched on a ratlin, "a white noddy, a strange fowl, so called from its lethargic, somnambulistic character, being frequently caught by hand at sea" (B. C., 1114). The mysterious figurehead of this ship of death turns out to be a skeleton, the bones of the dead master of the slaves, Aranda. This symbol of death is also found in Heart of Darkness when Marlow describes the bones of his predecessor, Fresleven, likewise killed by the blacks, although not out of the complicated malice toward civilization of the slaves, but in simple ignorance of its ways. In both stories, these images of decay are primarily associated with the representatives of European civilization.

Fog and other visual impediments figure prominently in the tales, both as bars to physical perception and as symbols of the impossibility of mental perception. Captain Delano approaches the San Dominick and his confrontation with Cereno through a ragged fog. Likewise, when Marlow nears the Inner Station, a white fog sets in "very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night" (H. D., 250). In "Benito Cereno" these impediments often serve to hide important evidence of the true state of affairs aboard the ship from Captain Delano. A piece of canvas covers the San Dominick's ghastly figurehead until the moment of revelation near the end of the tale. A coarse woollen shirt conceals the fine linen undergarment of the Spanish nobleman forced to pose as a sailor. The windows and doors of the state cabin are mysteriously calked

shut. Even when the factual truth of the situation has been revealed, however, Delano still cannot comprehend the troubled soul of Cereno, a lack of understanding which Melville conveys with the image of another visual obstruction: "the moody man [Cereno] sat, slowly and unconsciously gathering his mantle about him, as if it were a pall" (B. C., 1179).

Just as Cereno's fatal perception of the darkness is hidden from Delano, the kind of knowledge of the darkness of man's soul which Kurtz achieves is hidden from all of the other characters in Conrad's story. In Kurtz's painting, seen by Marlow in the Central Station, a blindfolded woman is represented carrying a torch against a background that is "sombre--almost black" (H. D., 234), a picture highly symbolic of the state of the artist before he reached the heart of the wilderness. "The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister" (H. D., 234). At Kurtz's death, Marlow says, "It was as though a veil had been rent," and speculates, "Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge?" (H. D., 283). In contrast, when Marlow himself wrestles with death it is "in an impalpable greyness" (H. D., 284), and he declares "I was within a hair's breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say" (H. D., 284). But Kurtz "had something to say" (H. D., 284) because he had seen into the truth of his own heart.

In Heart of Darkness, and in "Benito Cereno," whatever self-knowledge Kurtz, Marlow, or Cereno may have gained is ultimately impossible to communicate to another. At one point Marlow asks his listeners despairingly, "Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything?" (H. D., 237). Marlow's conception of what meaning can be found in experience is, significantly, conveyed through the use of metaphors of haze and mist:

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical...and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (H. D., 213)

The images of veils, mists, fogs, and other coverings found in both tales thus serve to reinforce the themes of the enigma of reality and the isolation of the individual.

Both stories contain the traditional symbols of water and the ship. In Melville's tale the sea with its connotations of nature at its most implacable and destructive is the scene of the drama,¹³ and in Conrad's tale the snake-like Congo River is the thing that first lures Marlow to his confrontation with Kurtz. The ship with its inherent idea of a microcosm of the world figures in both stories. But the hostile and alien view of nature in the two works is expressed mainly in terms of two vitally different sets of symbols. In

¹³Seltzer, pp. 18-20, discusses the symbol of the sea.

Heart of Darkness, nature is seen in terms of its teeming vegetable life. Describing his journey up the river, Marlow says:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. (H. D., 244)

In "Benito Cereno" the symbols of unpredictable nature are the humans themselves, seen in terms of animal imagery.¹⁴ This nature can seem deceptively benign to the imperceptive Delano.¹⁵ A black woman sleeps with her child "like a doe in the shade of a woodland rock" with its fawn (B. C., 1137), yet all the black women are later revealed to be enthusiastic participants in the mutiny. At different points of the story, the blacks are variously compared to sheep, doves, leopar-
desses, bats, dogs, and wolves. The whites are compared to animals as well; one of the sailors Delano encounters is described as behaving like a sheepish grizzly bear; the knotter's "skin was shrunk up with wrinkles like a pelican's empty pouch" (B. C., 1140). During the climactic battle near the end, the confrontation between black and white forces is described in terms of marine life: "For a few breaths' space, there was a vague, muffled, inner sound, as of submerged sword-fish rushing hither and thither through shoals of black-fish" (B. C., 1165).

¹⁴Robin Magowan, "Masque and Symbol in Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" College English, 23 (1962), 350.

¹⁵Cardwell, p. 159.

The imagery and symbolism of both stories, then, with their ambiguity, decadent quality, and connotations of brute force, serve as clues to the nature of both Melville's and Conrad's vision. According to Barry Phillips, the continuing symbol in "Benito Cereno" is the ship which symbolizes the world and within that world the strange and uncertain character of life.¹⁶ Indeed, the two symbols in "Benito Cereno" which perhaps best sum up and express Melville's view of reality are the ship's motto "Follow your leader" and its stern piece. Both symbols are shrouded in ambiguity, as are the situations they can be seen to represent. The question of who is meant by "leader," the dead Aranda or the living Babo, reverberates to the very end of the tale. Obviously, the person who scrawled the message on the pedestal meant Aranda, but ultimately it could be either. The stern piece, the "key symbol" according to Phillips,¹⁷ is "medallioned about by groups of mythological or symbolical devices, uppermost and central of which was a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked" (B. C., 1114). In the course of the tale, Benito, who is perceived by Captain Delano to be in tyrannical, though eccentric, command, is revealed to be the prisoner of Babo, thought by Delano to be the prostrate slave. The

¹⁶Barry Phillips, "'The Good Captain': A Reading of 'Benito Cereno,'" Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 4 (1962), 189.

¹⁷Phillips, p. 190.

reality aboard the ship is one where meanings are disguised, turned upside-down, diverse and relative.¹⁸ Nature is benign one moment and savage the next. Perception is unreliable, bad lurks within the seeming good. Babo is Don Benito's fawning, affectionate slave one moment, the next he is jumping overboard after him with a knife in his hand.

Babo is perhaps the most complex, ambiguous symbol of all. Critics often see him as an embodiment of pure evil, yet as Barry Phillips points out, his is not the purely motiveless evil of Claggart in Billy Budd. He has a reason for the cruelty that he carries to excess: he wishes to return to Africa with his people. Rather, Phillips finds that Babo is the hidden force underneath man's exterior, a force which recoils upon its suppressor.¹⁹ Babo can thus be compared to Kurtz in Heart of Darkness, another example of released human potential. In both cases, the forces of civilization have been the suppressors; ^{they have been} once removed or overthrown, the natural ugliness and brutality show forth. This force is not the "pure, uncomplicated savagery" of the primeval natives in Heart of Darkness, but a more depraved kind that wants power over all it sees.

For both Melville and Conrad, all men have the capacity for evil, for all are essentially egotistical in nature, driven by their "wills," and these wills are only barely

¹⁸Phillips, p. 190.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 189-90.

suppressed by the "ideas" of civilization.²⁰ The solitary man is virtually helpless to suppress the unfettered will. This is suggested in Heart of Darkness, when Marlow asks his listeners:

--how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude--utter solitude without a policeman--by the way of silence--utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbor can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things make all the great difference. (H. D., 261)

This weakness of these "ideas" when they are separated from civilized society itself can be seen in "Benito Cereno".

The rapacious will of Babo, once it has shaken loose the bonds which have held it captive and has assumed complete authority over the ship, causes him to commit brutality after brutality. Likewise Kurtz, in the solitude of the malignant jungle, accedes to the demands of his imperious will, and the "idea" which he came to spread among the savages turns into the postscript, "Exterminate all the Brutes!" (H. D., 262). The distinction must be made, however, that, whereas Kurtz is a representative of civilization who has been corrupted by the discovery of the wilderness in his soul, Babo is a slave of that civilization and perhaps never assented to its ideas.

Because mankind was for them basically egotistical and moral systems were ultimately relative, neither Conrad nor Melville had any faith in the efficacy of civilization to

²⁰Green, p. 294.

reform man.²¹ The greedy conquerors of the darkness in Africa in Heart of Darkness are the descendants of a people once conquered themselves by the light of Roman civilization. In his narrator Marlow, Conrad has a mouthpiece through which he can express this and other examples of the ephemeral nature of civilization. At the Inner Station, when Marlow must make a choice between two devils, the "weak, flabby devil" of civilized greed, or Kurtz, who "had taken a high seat amongst the devils of that land--I mean literally" (H. D., 261), no high idealistic options are offered him, for in the reality which Marlow perceives in the depth of the jungle, none exist. Aboard the San Dominick, a blithely ignorant character like Amasa Delano might imagine that the line between the good whites and the bad blacks is sharply drawn, but if the civilization of the whites had not conquered and suppressed the blacks in the first place, the evils which are perpetrated by the rebellious slaves would never have happened.

To both authors, then, the force of nature is hostile, reality is equivocal, and appearances are deceptive. There is no final, set distinction between good and evil in either story. The "thematic color" of "Benito Cereno" is gray, a mixture of the misleading symbolic colors of white and black.²² The story takes place against a background composed almost entirely of this color:

²¹Seltzer, p. 42.

²²Cardwell, p. 164

Everything was mute and calm; everything gray. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter's mould. The sky seemed a gray surtout. Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms. (B. C., 1112)

The backgrounds of Heart of Darkness are polarized into dark and light, but the brightness of the tropical sun is as unpleasant as the darkness of the forest is menacing. Against these two backgrounds, in neither story is a character able to perceive the truth about man's nature and the indifference of the universe to any "idea" of morality and still keep his basic belief in civilization intact.

II

In the vision of reality shared by Melville and Conrad, people can keep their illusions of civilization as a "light" and of humanity as basically good only by remaining ignorant. In Heart of Darkness, Marlow's "excellent aunt" and the exalted Intended at the end are both protected from the dark reality of life by the lies of men. The world which they believe in has never existed. As Marlow observes:

It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over. (H. D., 221)

In "Benito Cereno" the deluded character is the man from whose point of view we see most of the story--Captain Amasa Delano. His "beautiful world" is maintained by self-deception.

The most important difference between Heart of Darkness and "Benito Cereno" is the contrast between the reaction to reality of the self-deluded Delano and that of the skeptical Marlow. Both characters are the devices of their authors, but the distance Melville maintains from Delano is far greater than that which Conrad maintains from Marlow. By using Delano's point of view for most of the story, Melville can

practice the same deceit on the reader that the blacks in the story practice on the good captain.²³ Because the omniscient narrator makes use of Delano's limitations of perception to drop hints about his questionable veracity, however, the reader at the end understands more than Delano is ever able to.²⁴ Marlow, on the other hand, is the narrator of the story within Heart of Darkness, and his point of view is kept throughout the relation of the events in Africa. For many reasons, he is a far more trustworthy perceiver.

Many critics find Delano to be a stupid, naive, hypocritical, dense, typically optimistic American fool. Others, Clinton Keeler for example, have seen him as representing a philosophy of optimism current in Melville's day and held by Ralph Waldo Emerson.²⁵ Melville appreciated Emerson for his "Metaphysical speculation."²⁶ As he wrote to E. A. Duyckinck in a letter dated March 3, 1849:

frankly, for the sake of the argument, let us call him a fool; then I had rather be a fool than a wise man.--I love all men who dive. Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go downstairs.²⁷

²³Mary Rohrberger, "Point of View in 'Benito Cereno': Machinations and Deceptions," College English, 27 (1966), 542.

²⁴Rohrberger, pp. 541-46.

²⁵Clinton Keeler, "Melville's Delano: Our Cheerful Axiologist," College Language Association Journal, 10 (1966) 51-52.

²⁶Keeler, p. 52.

²⁷As quoted in Keeler, p. 52.

But as Melville's marginal comments on some of Emerson's essays indicate, he could not comprehend how one could "go downstairs" and remain an optimist.²⁸ His Delano is sent into a situation where man's depravity is rampant and reality is revealed in all its ambiguity, yet the Captain retains his Emersonian trust in nature, in his fellow man, and finally in himself. As Melville states at the beginning of "Benito Cereno," Delano is

a person of singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man. Whether, in view of what humanity is capable, such a trait implies, along with a benevolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception, may be left to the wise to determine. (B. C., 1112)

Whether Delano is a kind of test of Emersonian idealism, a philosopher if you will, or just a simple fool, it still remains true that he fails to comprehend the reality of the world by the end of the story, and remains in delusion. Whether it is stupidity or intrepid optimism that shuts Delano's mind, the fact remains that he lacks the kind of intelligence that enables Marlow to perceive the fundamental reality of the natural evil within man's soul.

Marlow is always willing to face reality squarely, whether it be the hunger of the cannibals, the heads on the poles before Kurtz's hut, or the runaway, demented Kurtz himself. He not only faces the facts, he constantly questions

²⁸Keeler, p. 52. It is important to note that Melville purchased the copies of Emerson's essays in which he made his marginal comments after "Benito Cereno" was published.

the reasons behind them. When faced with the remarkable restraint of the obviously starving cannibals, Marlow says, "I looked at them as you would on any human being, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity" (H. D., 253). In "Benito Cereno," on the other hand, Delano constantly turns away from the confrontation with reality, and if he has questions at all, he resolves them in terms of what he would like their answers to be, not in terms of tangible evidence. At one point in the story, puzzled by Don Benito's unpredictability, Delano suspects him for a fraud and an enemy:

To think that, under the aspect of infantile weakness, the most savage energies might be couched--those velvets of the Spaniard but the silky paw to his fangs.

From no train of thought did these fancies come; not from within, but from without; suddenly too, and in one throng, like hoar frost; yet as soon to vanish as the mild sun Captain Delano's good-nature regained its meridian. (B. C., 1129)

As a result of his observations and intuitions, Marlow's idea of nature is of a brooding, terrible force, an opposite conception from Delano's happy view of "yon bright sun... the blue sea, and the blue sky" (B. C., 1179). Delano imagines that he was in the care of Providence during his day aboard the San Dominick. To Marlow, there is no protection for a man once he has gone beyond the bounds of civilized restraint and into a world that is unfamiliar to him, unless that protection come from within himself. "You must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness" (H. D., 261).

Because of their opposing viewpoints, there is a marked difference between Marlow's reactions to the events of his African journey and Delano's reactions to the events which take place aboard the San Dominick. Marlow's first impressions of the company in Belgium typify his sceptical approach to everything. He is uneasy. He feels something in the atmosphere that he doesn't like--from the presence of the knitting women ^{and} the smallness of the great man, ^{to} the document not to reveal trade secrets. As he explains, "You know I am not used to such ceremonies, and there was something ominous in the atmosphere. It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy--I don't know--something not quite right" (H. D., 219). Marlow realizes from the first that he is in a strange situation, a world where his old methods of dealing with the facts of life don't apply. Later, as his steamer travels down the coast of Africa, he finds comfort in "straight-forward" realities like "the voice of the surf" and the vital black rowers when

The idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and languid sea, the uniform somberness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion. (H. D., 222)

From the beginning, Marlow seeks touchstones of reality in this world where foreign gunboats shoot into the sides of continents at hidden camps of natives who are called enemies. Later, as he makes his way to Kurtz and the Inner Station, he is sustained by his work, which is "the chance to find yourself. Your own reality..." (H. D., 239).

Delano is equipped with no such wary scepticism as he steps aboard the San Dominick. He has already decided that she is a ship in helpless distress, and, being Delano, he will admit the possibility of more sinister reasons for her decrepit condition only "on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then" (B. C., 1112). He proceeds to explain away or dismiss all clues that the situation is not what it seems. There are obvious discrepancies between the story that Cereno tells him and the evidence before his eyes. The insolent behavior of the blacks does not match the description Don Benito offers of their self-control during the hardships of the voyage, nor does it square with the impression that the captain is in tyrannical, arbitrary command over them given by the submission of Atufal. Delano's answer is to attribute it to the capriciousness of Cereno, and to dismiss any other explanations that occur to him. When the old sailor tries to give him a clue to the real state of affairs aboard the San Dominick in the form of an intricate knot, Delano absently gives it away to the black who asks for it, and gives the peculiar gift no further thought.

Marlow, faced with mysterious motives and conspiratorial behavior in the Europeans, knows enough to keep them at a wary distance. He has had no preconception of what his situation in Africa would be, and he has no faith in the goodness of men. At the Central Station, though Kurtz is still just a word for him, he allows the "papier-mache Mephistopheles,"

the first agent, to persist in his mistaken belief that Marlow has special influence in Europe. Marlow says that though he detests lying,

I went near enough to it by letting the young fool there believe anything he liked to imagine as to my influence in Europe. I became in an instant as much of a pretense as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims. This simply because I had a notion it somehow would be of help to that Kurtz whom at the time I did not see. (H. D., 237)

Marlow, unlike Delano, because of his mental capacity to face situations and question them, can see through pretense and discern the true motives of men. He is then able to adjust his behavior toward them accordingly. He does this by letting them reveal themselves to him. Delano, aboard the San Dominick, chatters away amiably, thoughtlessly giving away information about his ship to questions from the Spaniard that even the benevolent American captain must admit are suspicious. Marlow's method is rather to wait and listen, allowing the manager and his spy, and later the harlequin and Kurtz, to show themselves for what they are.

One vital difference between the two captains lies in their reaction to the primitive men they are confronted with. From almost his first sight of Africa, Marlow perceives the futility and senselessness of subjecting the natives to laws which they cannot possibly understand, laws that operate in a moral system alien to their own. At the first station, as he hears a blast from a hill above where the railroad is being built and watches a chain gang of miserable blacks pass him, he observes:

Another report from the cliff made me think suddenly of that ship of war I had seen firing into a continent. It was the same kind of ominous voice; but these men could by no stretch of the imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. (H. D., 224)

Marlow not only understands that the natives are being treated with cruelty and stupidity by the forces of civilized man, he feels a kinship to them, a comprehension of the fact of their humanity. At one point, he describes his reaction when his steamboat would round a bend and come upon a tribe of frenzied, dancing natives:

It was unearthly, and the men were--No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it--this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity--like yours--the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you--you so remote from the night of first ages--could comprehend. (H. D., 246-47)

It is this admission of kinship which prepares Marlow for his confrontation with the man whose soul has given in to the lure of the "wild and passionate uproar," and enables him to understand that the tendency to return to this primitive state exists within himself as well.

Amasa Delano never has a feeling of kinship with the blacks aboard the San Dominick. He often sees them in terms of animal imagery. We are told at one point that "like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to Negroes,

not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs" (B. C., 1148). He sees the Negress and her child, of course, as a doe with her fawn, "naked nature." At one point he asks Cereno if the oakum pickers are "shepherds to your flock of black sheep?" (B. C., 1125). In this way, he constantly reminds himself of his superiority to them. During one of his moments of suspicion over the behavior of Don Benito, Delano wonders if perhaps the bad character which Cereno has given of the white sailors was given in anticipation of their possible interference with the Spaniard's malicious plans. He observes, "The whites, too, by nature, were the shrewder race" (B. C., 1139). When he considers the possibility that Cereno and the blacks are in a conspiracy, he comforts himself with the thought that the blacks are by nature too stupid to be in complicity with the Spaniard, and "Besides, who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguering in against it with negroes" (B. C., 1140). One of the central ironies of "Benito Cereno" is that the chief black character, Babo, is man of far greater intelligence and subtlety than the "superior" Delano.²⁹

Because of his feeling of superiority to the blacks, the American is all too willing to follow the dictates of the oppressive civilization which has enslaved them. He believes implicitly in its necessary tenet that the blacks

²⁹E. F. Carlisle, "Captain Amasa Delano: Melville's American Fool," Criticism, 7 (1965), 359.

are sub-human and inferior, and he carries out its "justice" in the end by re-enslaving the "savages." Marlow may not be willing to admit an equality with the natives he sees in Africa, but his identification with them and his perception of the brutality of the company are such that, as his steamboat pulls away from the Inner Station, he blows the whistle in order to frighten the blacks on shore away and prevent the pilgrims from shooting at them.

When he reaches the Inner Station and Kurtz, Marlow is ready to receive the insight which the "initiated wraith" can give him. To listen to Kurtz has in fact been the real purpose of his journey, and when there is a brief conviction that Kurtz is dead, Marlow admits this to himself:

I couldn't have been more disgusted if I had travelled all this way for the sole purpose of talking with Mr. Kurtz. Talking with...I flung one shoe overboard, and became aware that that was exactly what I had been looking forward to--a talk with Kurtz. I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, but as discoursing...The man presented himself as a voice. (H. D., 258-59)

When he finally meets Kurtz and listens to him, he understands the fact of human life which Kurtz represents.

Because he has felt the urge of primitive nature within himself and the hostile power of it surrounding him, Marlow can identify what has happened to Kurtz. The wilderness has taken possession of Kurtz--"it had caressed him, and--lo!--he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation" (H. D., 260). Marlow is bound to Kurtz when he

seeks him through the jungle at night and experiences for himself the isolation which drove Kurtz to his madness.³⁰ He recalls, "I thought I would never get back to the steamer, and imagined myself living alone and unarmed in the woods to an advanced age" (H. D., 278).

For Delano, just as there is no identification with the black men aboard the ship, there is none with the dying Captain Cereno whose life they have so profoundly affected. It is true that he did not come aboard the San Dominick seeking insight into the hearts of men, but Marlow didn't know exactly what he would find when he began his journey, either. Marlow, however, is always willing to learn from the life around him, whereas Delano is too wrapped up in his own optimism and "Emersonian self-trust"³¹ to take anything but a somewhat superior, injured, and puzzled attitude to the Spaniard. He feels superior because the evidence of poor leadership all around him is in marked contrast to his own conduct aboard the Bachelor's Delight. He muses within himself:

Is it...that this hapless man is one of those paper captains I've known who by policy wink at what by power they cannot put down? I know no sadder sight than a commander who has little of command but the name. (B. C. 1124)

He can only judge the Spanish captain's conduct by his own high standard. He feels injured because the Spaniard's

³⁰James C. Dahl, "Kurtz, Marlow, Conrad and the Human Heart of Darkness," Studies in the Literary Imagination, 1 (Oct., 1968), 37.

³¹Keeler, p. 55.

unusual behavior is an affront to his dignity. He is puzzled because these discourtesies do not match up with what he wants to believe of Cereno, indeed what he wants to believe of all men, that they are basically good. Delano is egotistical in the extreme; he sees everything in terms of his perception of himself. Because of this, he is barred from the kind of knowledge which Marlow is able to achieve. What Melville once wrote about Emerson can also be applied to Delano:

His gross and astonishing errors and illusions spring from a self-conceit so intensely intellectual and calm that at first one hesitates to call it by its right name. Another species of Mr. Emerson's errors, or rather, blindness, proceeds from a defect in the region of the heart.³²

According to Clinton Keeler, "Captain Delano's failure in knowledge is intuitive and moral, the knowledge of the heart."³³

"Knowledge of the heart" is what both Kurtz, and Marlow through Kurtz, come to comprehend. Kurtz, Marlow's diabolical double, came to the Congo as an emissary from the forces of civilization. "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" we are told (H. D., 261). As the epitome of a civilized man, Kurtz is a test case, a man equipped with a huge potential for corruption.³⁴ He has had no "restraint" on

³²As quoted in Keeler, p. 55.

³³Keeler, p. 55.

³⁴Donald R. Benson, "Heart of Darkness: The Grounds of Civilization in an Alien Universe," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 7 (1966), 345.

his will, and in the end he is destroyed by his unchecked desire. His ego becomes everything; it leads him to madness, a madness disguised by eloquence.³⁵ He talks of everything in terms of himself. "You should have heard him say, 'my ivory.' Oh yes, I heard him. 'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my--' everything belonged to him" (H. D., 260). But as Marlow ironically observes, "Everything belonged to him--but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own" (H. D., 260). In his egotism, Kurtz could perhaps be compared to Delano, but although Delano is self-centered, he lacks the intelligence, perception, and gifts of a Kurtz. As Marlow comments, "I take it, no fool ever made a bargain for his soul with the devil: the fool is too much of a fool, or the devil too much of a devil--I don't know which" (H. D., 261). Kurtz's intelligence to the end remains "perfectly clear."

Kurtz's eloquence, the power of his marvelous voice, remains to the end as well, and in the end it betrays the truth about its owner to Marlow. "Kurtz discoursed. A voice! a voice! It rang deep to the very last. It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart" (H. D., 282). Marlow asserts that Kurtz was "a remarkable man" because at his death he faced this darkness in himself, and judged it. "He cried out

³⁵Seltzer, pp. 1-7.

twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: 'The horror! The horror!'" (H. D., 283). Because Marlow himself comes close to death soon after, he is able to say:

I understand better the meaning of his stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up--he had judged. (H. D., 284)

Through his journey to and encounter with Kurtz, Marlow has come to understand the terrible potential within himself, and within every man, and the feebleness of civilization when it tries to repress the response to the alien and hostile wilderness. Though Kurtz ultimately remains for him "an impenetrable darkness" (H. D., 283), his encounter with him still has served

somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me--and into my thoughts. It was somber enough, too--and pitiful--not extraordinary in any way--not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light. (H. D., 215)

Benito Cereno, like Kurtz, is a representative of civilization, but he has not, in contrast to his counterpart, set out to spread its light among the savages. He is part of the system that has subjugated the black men to its purposes, and he never sought to transcend that system any further than to let the slaves sleep on the deck without fetters, on the assurances of their owner Aranda. Thus, Cereno represents civilization taken unawares by the powers of darkness, the unbridled will which is embodied particularly in Babo, whose mind is a "hive of subtlety" (B. C., 1179).

Cereno is forced to recognize the reality of an ambiguous universe and a depraved soul. The "unspeakable rites"--murder and cannibalism--are acted out before his eyes and partly described by him in the deposition. But Cereno, by the evidence of his testimony, does not seem to have identified with the primitive man or to have felt any kinship with Babo. This can only be speculation, however, because the true state of Cereno's heart is never really known, there are only hints. Although it is questionable whether the Spaniard ever achieves a knowledge of the potential for evil within his own heart as a result of his experience, it is undeniably true that, like Kurtz, he dies a broken man, haunted by a reality which, in his case, has been forced upon him.

Delano would have Cereno forget his experience. On their way to Lima after the revolt has been quelled, he tries to comfort him by pointing out the benevolent face of nature:

But these mild trades that now fan your cheek,
do they not come with a human-like healing to
you? Warm friends, steadfast friends are the
trades."

"With their steadfastness they but waft me
to my tomb, Senor," was the foreboding response.

"You are saved," cried Captain Delano, more
and more astonished and pained; "you are saved; what
has cast such a shadow upon you?"

"The negro." (B. C., 1179)

After this exchange, we are told, "There was no more conversation that day" (B. C., 1179). Although he refuses to look at Babo, Cereno cannot forget the evil represented by the black, the human will unrestrained by any force of civilization. He has seen this will in action, and he therefore has insight into reality to impart at the end. Jesse Green

has observed that Delano's confrontation has been with a kind of split Kurtz, with whiteness polarized in Cereno and blackness in Babo.³⁶ But Delano, as has been seen, lacks Marlow's ability either to identify with the blackness in Babo, or to respond to the knowledge within Cereno with anything but silence.

At the beginning of Heart of Darkness, Marlow says that the only thing which redeems the conquest of the earth is "an idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea--something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer sacrifice to..." (H. D., 215). The great irony of this statement is that Marlow knows, through his experience in Africa, that such ideas can only be illusions. Nevertheless, at the end of the story, when he visits Kurtz's Intended, he does not contradict her as she reminisces about his greatness and the power of his voice:

'But you have heard him! You know!' she cried.
 "'Yes, I know,' I said with something like despair in my heart, but bowing my head before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness, in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her--from which I could not even defend myself. (H. D., 290)

At the end of Heart of Darkness, Marlow preserves the Intended in her illusion by lying to her about Kurtz's dying words, sacrificing what he knows to be the truth to the idea in which she must have faith in order to survive. In this way, he beats back the forces of darkness and the wilderness which

³⁶Green, p. 291.

seem to enter her house with him; he saves her soul. It is a shaky affirmation, but it is an affirmation of Conrad's vision of the necessity of some kind of idea, none the less.³⁷

In "Benito Cereno" there is no such affirmation. Melville may have expressed it elsewhere, in Billy Budd, for example, but it is not here.³⁸ Delano remains ignorant of the true nature of the reality which he was immersed in aboard the San Dominick; Cereno, although he has perceived the reality of the "human heart of darkness," is unable to live with his perception. The retaking of his ship and the return of civilized order are not sufficient for him. Delano lacks Marlow's insight; Cereno lacks Marlow's strength. "Benito Cereno" ends in the negation of the idea of civilization, finding it only tenable as held by the ignorant fool, or blind, undaunted optimist: Amasa Delano.

Of the two works, then, "Benito Cereno" is the more terrible indictment of the weakness of civilization when faced with the power of the primitive will. Although the effect of the depravity of the highly civilized Kurtz may be more jolting than that of the probably uncivilized Babo, Marlow's ability to face the truth of it and yet remain faithful to the necessary illusions of human life offsets the horror of Kurtz's final vision. It is indicative of Conrad's

³⁷Green, p. 294. He discusses Conrad's commitment to "idea."

³⁸Ibid., p. 304.

work in general that, although the terrible truths are recognized by his perceptive characters, they are not allowed to overcome civilized life.³⁹ In "Benito Cereno," on the other hand, the Spaniard, as the chief representative of Old World values, is unable to reassert the idea of civilization for himself or for anyone else. The implication is that no civilized being who perceives the truth about man and the universe will be able to survive the experience. It is an implication which Conrad would probably find intolerable.

In Heart of Darkness, and in most of his other fiction, Conrad stresses the necessity of illusion, even those who are aware of the truth. Melville was often concerned with the preservation of the order of civilized life as well. His Captain Vere is willing to sacrifice Billy Budd to it, and Ishmael condemns Captain Ahab for his betrayal of it. But Melville was willing to leave the metaphysical problems that he focused upon unresolved by his characters; Captain Cereno is left unredeemed and in darkness by his author. It is Conrad's concern with man's ethical imperatives in an incomprehensible universe which most sharply differentiates Heart of Darkness from "Benito Cereno." They remain two very similar, yet at the same time unique, explorations of the problem of evil.

³⁹Seltzer, p. 97.

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